

CNN NEWSNIGHT AARON BROWN

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BROWN: We began tonight with the firefight in Afghanistan that killed Army Ranger Pat Tillman last April. Chaos and confusion shape every battlefield. And the fog of war can be deadly, which brings us to the challenge of preparing young soldiers for their first taste of war.

It's an age-old mission that's being reshaped by technology, Fort Sill, Oklahoma the forefront.

(BEGIN VIDEOTAPE)

BROWN (voice-over): Inside the battered room, two American soldiers try to plot the precise trajectory of artillery shells they will soon direct to a target in Baghdad. Then the lights go out and sniper rounds crackle across the room with eerie accuracy.

STAFF SGT. JARROD FRANK, U.S. ARMY: Having been there, especially being in this room, just looking around this, it is very, very similar to what you're actually going to see when you're on the ground over there.

BROWN: None of it is real, not the ragged room, nor the view out the window. It's all part of a very expensive, long-term relationship between video game experts, scientists, special effects wizards and the U.S. Army. The idea, of course, is to save lives on the battlefield, lives that are all-too genuine.

MAJ. JAMES STRINGER, U.S. ARMY: We really want to make this training as realistic as possible, so that the guys are not facing these types of situations in this environment for the first time in combat.

BROWN: This is the central nervous system of the project, desktop computers crammed with the latest software to mimic street life in an Iraqi city.

RICHARD BLEAU, TELOS-OK SYSTEMS: I hit play. You see, we have got the (INAUDIBLE) view is playing right now. You can hear the students talking over the radio.

BROWN: Each pair of trainees is given a mission to destroy Iraqi targets before being spotted and killed.

STAFF SGT. CHRISTOPHER ROBERTS, U.S. ARMY: I think this is great. This is the best training I've ever seen in the Army, the props, the whole set. It's the most realistic thing I've seen.

BROWN: For the price the Army is paying, it ought to be. So far, it's cost about \$45 million over five years, most of the money going to the firm called the Institute For Creative Technologies at the University of Southern California.

It's the same group responsible for this, a video game supported by the Army called "Full Spectrum Warrior." It's proven to be one of the most popular games on the Internet. UNIDENTIFIED MALE: Ranger 267, offset right, six nautical miles.

BROWN: And the training isn't confined to urban warfare. These soldiers look as if they're in an Afghan desert calling in an airstrike, but this is a set as well, complete with a Humvee and laser-sighting scope. Ultimately, all kinds of scenarios will be possible.

STRINGER: This facility that we're in right now is actually a prototype, kind of a proof of the concept. And what we're ultimately hoping to do is build a much larger, more capable facility, create a series of configurable base that we can simulate any portion of the world that we need.

BROWN: The military says all this will ultimately save money, no need to conduct as many live fire tests with real ammunition over and over again to make reality at least a little less daunting.

FRANK: I'm not saying soldiers are going to feel a sense of safety when they're on the ground over there, but as much realistic training as you can get here in the United States, when you get over there, it is going to be that much more valuable.

(END VIDEOTAPE)

BROWN: Fort Sill, Oklahoma.